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Sexual Socialization

Title of entry: Sexual Socialization

Definition: Adolescents' development of attitudes, norms, beliefs and behaviors regarding sexuality in response to socialization agents.

Introduction

During adolescence, sexual processes take up a central position. The acquisition of a positive sexual identity is considered to be a key developmental task for adolescents (Tolman & McClelland, 2011) and can be described as the process of "understanding [one's] own sexual orientation as well as sexual needs and values, preferences for sexual activities, partner characteristics, and modes of sexual expression (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002) (p.512)." Modern evolutionary theory explains that this process is driven by biological stimuli, such as pubertal maturation and sexual hormones (Steinberg, 2005), and is influenced by environmental factors as environmental flexibility helps to meet biological goals (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991).

The most significant environmental factors are so-called sexual socialization agents (i.e., parents, peers, and media) that guide adolescents' development of attitudes, norms, beliefs and behaviors regarding sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Ward, 2003). Social learning theory explains that these agents (e.g., peers or media characters) may model sexual and relational behavior that can be observed and adopted by adolescents, especially if the behavior is rewarded (Bandura, 1999). In addition, these agents inform adolescents on attitudes, norms and beliefs towards sexuality that are considered as favorable (Bandura, 1999).

Importantly, sexual socialization agents differ in the *type* of messages they promote as being favorable. More precisely, the literature distinguishes positive and negative messages.

Positive messages are messages that socialize adolescents towards a positive sexuality defined as "sexuality that is consensual, honest, mutually pleasurable, non-exploitative, and protected against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)" (Ward, Day, & Epstein, 2006) (p.59). When messages deviate from this description of a positive sexuality, they are regarded as negative or risky in the literature.

Because of the substantial impact that the development of a sexual identity has on adolescents' current, but also their future well-being, research has studied extensively the relationships between sexual socialization agents and adolescent sexual maturation (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Over the years, three (related) areas of research have been developed that each focus on a key socialization agent: (1) parents, (2) peers, and (3) media.

Main text

Parents

Parents are considered to be the prime socialization influences in children's life (Belsky et al., 1991). During childhood, parents model and structure children's early understandings of sexual relations and the roles of women and men in sexual interactions (Belsky et al., 1991; Inazu & Fox, 1980). The influence of parents in sexual maturation persists in adolescence (Tolman & McClelland, 2011), but takes on different shapes. Adolescents increasingly start to explore their own sexuality and talk with their parents about sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011), though, at the same time, they start to rely less on their parents in general (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Adolescents identify their parents as sources of information on physical health risks and responsibilities that come with sexual behavior (Epstein & Ward, 2007). The importance of developing a sexual agentic self-concept, sexual desires and respect for sexual minorities is in general less likely to be covered in the sexual socialization messages of parents (Epstein & Ward, 2007).

The inherent, hyper personal nature of sexuality is a burden on parent-child interactions regarding sex and may explain why topics, such as masturbation, are rarely covered in parental conversations about sex (Diiorio, Pluhar, & Belcher, 2003). Such conversations are characterized by feelings of discomfort, shame, and guilt, especially on the side of the adolescent (Epstein & Ward, 2007; Ogle, Glasier, & Riley, 2008). Mothers seem to handle these (somewhat) uncomfortable situations better than fathers as they talk more often to their sons and daughters about sexuality (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009; Diiorio et al., 2003).

In general, research suggests that parental sexual messages socialize adolescents towards attitudes and behaviors that are characterized by a focus on (health) responsibilities and a less supportive view of an early initiation of sexual behaviors (Bleakley et al., 2009; Inazu & Fox, 1980; L'Engle & Jackson, 2008), though, inconsistent findings have also emerged (Diiorio et al., 2003). In this view, the relationship between parental socialization and sexually protective behaviors has been found to vary according to factors, such as the timing of the parental message (before or after an adolescent's sexual debut) and the communication style of the parent (open vs. restrictive) (Miller, Levin, Whitaker, & Xu, 1998; Whitaker, Miller, May, & Levin, 1999).

Also, the literature warns that stereotypical beliefs about sexual gender roles seem to affect parental sexual socialization (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994). Such stereotypical beliefs are believed to be rooted in different inherited strategies for reproductive success by men and women (Eagly & Wood, 1999). These strategies encourage promiscuous sexual behavior among men (for instance, because men face the risk of raising children whom they are not biologically bounded to) and long-term committed relationships among women (for instance, because male partners can help to protect the family) (Eagly & Wood, 1999). In line with these strategies, socialization research has noticed that especially girls are socialized toward

restrictive sexual attitudes and behavior, while boys are sometimes even supported to gain (early) sexual experience by parent-sex communication (Diiorio et al., 2003; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994).

Overall, the literature indicates that parents can play an important role in postponing early sexual behavior and preventing a sexual risk trajectory (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). At the same time, the literature also suggests that the diversity of topics covered in parent-child conversations is sometimes limited (Epstein & Ward, 2007; Ogle et al., 2008) and that factors, such as gender stereotypes and communication style, partly determine the strength and direction that the influence of parental sexual socialization messages takes on.

Peers

While the importance of parents decreases during adolescence, peers gradually take on a more central role in adolescents' life (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). In general, adolescents heavily rely on peers in their everyday life and in particular for providing them with sexual information (Bleakley et al., 2009). Peer conversations about sex are common and focus on a variety of themes, such as exchanging their (emerging) experiences with sex and beliefs about (successful) sexual relationships (Epstein & Ward, 2007). Such conversations are likely to signal which sexual attitudes and behaviors are considered as normative in the peer group and seem to evoke pressure to comply to these peer standards.

While parents are known to rather support sexual abstinence in the literature, peers tend to socialize adolescents toward more positive liberal attitudes regarding sex and to support the initiation of (risky) sexual behavior (Bleakley et al., 2009; Epstein & Ward, 2007). This is demonstrated by research showing that adolescents become more popular when they gain sexual experience (Prinstein, Meade, & Cohen, 2003; Sieving, Eisenberg, Pettingell, & Skay, 2006). Moreover, research has reported that peer factors, such as perceived peer approval of

teen sex, perceived peer sexual behavior and general sexual communication with friends, increase adolescents' chances to initiate sexual intercourse and oral sex (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008; Prinstein et al., 2003).

(Perceived) social rewards thus seem to accelerate adolescents' sexual trajectory. However, null findings have also been found (Frison, Vandenbosch, Trekels, & Eggermont, 2015; Prinstein et al., 2003). In line with the literature explaining inconsistent results on parental sexual socialization, peer socialization processes may also differ for boys and girls. Stereotypical norms suggest girls should have some sexual experience, but cannot be seen as sexually promiscuous (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994), while boys consistently gain social status when having more sexual experience (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994). These stereotypes seem to shape peer sexual socialization as adolescent boys indicate to experience more peer pressure to initiate sexual activities at an early age than girls (Potard, Courtois, & Rusch, 2008). Accordingly, adolescents also believe that male peers are more sexually experienced than female peers (Frison et al., 2015).

Apart from these gender differences, other characteristics of peer networks, such as the religious background of one's close peers or their socio-economic status, may further determine the sexual norms that are promoted (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Moreover, the sexual norms promoted by one peer group may include some messages that are considered as risky for sexual maturation but, at the same time, also other messages that are protective for adolescent health. For instance, one study reported that the peer network of French adolescents socialized them towards positive attitudes toward contraception. The same peer group also promoted an early sexual debut, though (Potard et al., 2008).

Together, the literature suggests that the peer group socializes adolescents into a wide variety of themes regarding sexuality and (in general) tends to support adolescents to engage in (early) sexual behavior. Such pressure is intertwined with traditional gender roles. Some

literature also points to the importance of peer characteristics, such as the type of friends, to determine whether the peer network functions as a positive vs negative sexual socialization agent. Moreover, the influence of a particular peer group on adolescent sexuality may be positive or negative depending on the area of sexuality that is being considered. More knowledge is needed to further explain under which conditions peers may positively affect adolescent sexuality. This knowledge is particularly relevant as peers may perhaps have the most significant influence on adolescent sexuality.

Media

Adolescents indicate to spend a considerable amount of their daily time with using media (Vandenbosch, 2013). In the media popular among adolescents, sexual messages are prevalent (Ward, 2003). To illustrate, an average adolescent will be exposed to approximately 35,328 sexual television messages when he/she reaches adulthood (Vandenbosch, 2013). Media scholars argue that entertainment media (e.g., television and magazines), but also pornographic media are particularly appealing as sexual information sources because of their anonymous nature, prevalent and (in case of pornography "highly") explicit references to sex, and power to engage users in stories (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Ward, 2003). As for social media, their features can provide an online playground to experiment with one's sexual identity, but also to observe how other peers express their sexuality (e.g., through sexy selfies and sexting) (Ringrose, 2009).

In line with this reasoning, entertainment, social and pornographic media have been identified as valuable sexual information sources by adolescents (Bleakley et al., 2009; Ringrose, 2009; Vandenbosch, van Oosten, & Peter, 2018). These media can contain positive or negative information about sexuality. More precisely, some television shows and (online) magazines discuss potential risks and responsibilities that come with engaging in sexual

activities (Aubrey, 2004; Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008). Most literature has, however, warned for media's role as a risky sexual socialization agent (Brown et al., 2005) and in particular their promotion of the so-called *Reductionist Script of Instant Gratification* (Vandenbosch, 2013). In this script, sexuality is predominantly focused on receiving sexual satisfaction which is inherently linked to sexual attractiveness and stereotypical gender roles. Romance is reduced to a sexual, hedonistic game with differential play styles for boys and girls (i.e., sexual double standard), though, both are expected to comply with narrowly defined appearance ideals (i.e., being thin or muscular) (Vandenbosch, 2013).

Numerous studies have examined whether the components of this Reductionist Script of Instant Gratification in popular media leads to adversarial consequences for adolescent sexual maturation. For the associations between mainstream entertainment (i.e., television and magazines) and social media, and adolescent sexuality, inconsistent results have led to question the media's role as a socialization agent (Vandenbosch, 2013; Vandenbosch 2018). As for pornographic media, consistent support has emerged for the links between sexually explicit media use and adolescents' recreational attitudes toward sex, views of women as sex objects and increased (risky) sexual behavior (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Vandenbosch, 2013).

Importantly, research across media genres agrees that inconsistent findings have resulted from poor attention to the conditions that explain when and how adolescents may be affected by sexual media content (Vandenbosch, 2013). As such, the role of differential susceptibility factors and response states in sexual media effects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Vandenbosch, 2013; Ward, 2003) have been more systematically studied during the last decade. This research identified groups of adolescents who not only have an increased likelihood of being affected by exposure to the Reductionist Script of Instant Gratification in popular media, but also those who may benefit from media exposure (Vandenbosch, 2013). Important differential susceptibility factors refer to developmental traits (e.g., age, puberty),

social factors (e.g., family environment) and dispositional characteristics (e.g., sensation seeking, hyper gender identity) (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Ward, 2003). Studies on response states have shown that sexual media effects often occur 'indirectly' through processes, such as excitative (e.g., arousal) or cognitive (perceived utility of media content) responses (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016).

Together, the literature has described the affordances that media may offer as a sexual socialization agent for adolescents and the risk associated with the adoption of the information on sexuality that is (frequently) promoted in (popular) media. Current research seems to agree that media exposure may affect adolescent sexuality, but that these sexual media effects depend on differential susceptibility factor and develop through indirect processes (i.e., response states).

Reflections to Consider in Future Research

This review indicated that there is a substantial body of research on sexual socialization agents. Past research especially aimed to understand under which conditions parents function as protective sexual socialization agents, and peers and media as negative sexual socialization agents. The current overview of the literature has led to several critical gaps in the literature. These gaps suggest, at least, four major directions for future research.

First, research has mainly investigated sexuality from a reproductive health perspective focusing on sexual (risk) behavior and liberal sexual attitudes. The definition of a positive sexuality however points at different areas of sexuality including sexual desire, sexual intimacy, and respect towards sexual minorities (Ward et al., 2006). Little is known about which roles peers, parents and media may play in these areas with some notable exceptions, e.g., pornography effects on sexual satisfaction (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016) and peer effects on homophobic behavior (Birkett & Espelage, 2015).

Second, the general assumption that parents vs. peers and media are respectively protective and risky sexual socialization agents seems to prevent research from exploring whether these roles are not univocal and potentially may differ in regard of the considered area of sexuality and the type of adolescent. For instance, the representation of homosexual individuals in popular media is considered favorable for their visibility in the society, but the stereotypes surrounding their representation in media content is evaluated as problematic (Calzo & Ward, 2009). Given the pro's and con's attached to the televised messages on homosexuality, it is not surprising that research suggests some groups develop more positive attitudes toward homosexuality, while other groups seem to become less tolerant towards homosexuality when watching more television (Calzo & Ward, 2009). More precisely, women and less religious individuals have more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality in general. As a result, television exposure may cause them to develop less positive attitudes toward homosexuality. The reverse is true for men and more religious individuals, though. These groups appear to be less tolerant towards homosexuality in general, but seem to become more tolerant when watching more television (Calzo & Ward, 2009). Overall, more knowledge to explain under which conditions different socialization agents have a protective versus risky influence in various areas of sexuality is needed. Such insights will help to reveal the complex role that agents have in different groups of adolescents.

Third, the dynamic, reciprocal nature of the sexual socialization process is rarely examined in research. Theoretical models explaining how (sexual) socialization processes manifest themselves underline a dynamic interaction between an individual and his/her environment (Bandura, 1999). Individual or environmental traits will affect how the individual responds to sexual socialization messages. In turn, these responses will shape the future messages an individual receives from a socialization agent (Bandura, 1999). For instance, a mother may first socialize her daughter towards the adoption of rather liberal sexual attitudes.

Because of the sensation seeking personality of the daughter, she may respond to this socialization by engaging in risky sexual activities. When the mother obverses this behavior, she may (temporarily) change her approach and socialize her daughter toward more restrictive sexual attitudes and behavior. In this example, the socialization agent thus adapted her approach in response to the child's behavior. Although theory predicts such dynamic processes in socialization approaches, empirical research is largely lacking. Such research may provide useful insights in the conditions that shape different socialization influences, though. Longitudinal or dyadic daily experience studies may be especially warranted to examine such dynamic processes. Such studies are overall rather rare in the field of sexual socialization research.

Fourth, research has mainly studied the influence of socialization agents as separate entities, while (1) multiple socialization agents may simultaneously affect adolescent sexual maturation and (2) socialization agents may affect each other, which, in turn, may influence adolescents sexuality. First, a scarce set of studies has untangled how the influence of a sexual socialization agent can be strengthened, weakened or changed by the influence of another socialization agent on adolescent sexuality. These studies have shown that the (protective) influence of parents may interact with the (risky) influence of media and peers (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011a; Whitaker & Miller, 2000). For instance, when adolescents discuss sexual subjects with their parents more frequently, peer pressure to have sex tends to relate less strongly to adolescents' sexual behavior (van de Bongardt, de Graaf, & Reitz, 2014; Whitaker & Miller, 2000).

Second, limited research has examined models that propose interactions with other socialization agents as fundamental processes to explain the links between a socialization agent and adolescent sexuality. In this research, media use (e.g., increased exposure to reality TV) and parental interactions (e.g., lower parental support) were found to affect peer processes (e.g.,

increased sexual communication with peers, having more sexually active peer friends). In turn, these peer factors were related to adolescents' (advanced) sexual experiences (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011b; Ward, 2002; Whitbeck, Conger, & Kao, 1993).

Such research supports that the influence of sexual socialization agents cannot be considered as working independently from each other, but necessitates an interactive approach to truly unravel how sexual socialization processes influence adolescents' emerging sexualities.

Conclusion

Together, it has become clear that the role of sexual socialization agents needs to be considered by taking into account the complexity that surrounds the process of developing a sexual identity and in which multiple factors play a role. This review will hopefully help future research in revealing the interplay between different sexual socialization agents, different types of adolescents, and their sexual maturation processes.

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